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LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Looking for Balance in Montgomery County

The 25-year-old agricultural reserve — 93,000 acres set aside for agricultural uses and open space — has rightly been called the “crown jewel” of Montgomery County. Management of this land has meant striking a balance between preservation and growth.

The latest challenge involving the reserve concerns Private Institutional Facilities (PIFs). As defined by law, these are buildings constructed by nonprofits — generally, places of worship, private schools, housing for seniors or day-care centers. PIFs generally have been allowed greater flexibility for development in the reserve, with the underlying assumption that they are beneficial to the community and have less effect on the land than a residential or commercial development would.

Now, however, larger PIF devel-

opments want to locate within the reserve, and while faith-based organizations are a vital part of our daily lives, the integrity of the agricultural reserve is threatened.

The County Council has created a task force to explore alternatives to the existing PIF policies. The task force has proposed limiting the size of PIFs in agricultural zones, including restricting impervious surfaces such as buildings and parking lots to 15 percent of the site.

This recommendation, however, could harm agriculture and the environment without really addressing the needs of PIFs. For example, the 15 percent impervious-surface limitation could force PIFs to acquire more acreage, which would increase their costs and make even more land unavailable for agriculture.

The county has a number of zoning policies that encourage construction of housing and certain commercial development; it needs to develop similar policies to allow PIFs to grow in residential or commercial zones within transportation corridors.

For example, the council is exploring options for the redevelopment of older shopping centers. With the right incentives, these sites could become excellent locations for PIFs.

I believe the council can implement policies that will allow both agricultural and faith-based organizations to flourish in Montgomery County. The subject will be taken up at a public hearing at 7 p.m. tomorrow.

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